DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 312 355 UD 027 096

TITLE You Can't Get a Library Card if You're Homeless.
INSTITUTION Vermont State Dept. of Education, Montpelier.
PUB DATE Apr 89
NOTE 16p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrator Attitudes; *Ancillary School Services; Breakfast Programs; Clothing; *Family School Relationship; *Homeless People; Lunch Programs; Poverty; Self Concept; *Special Needs Students; *Teacher Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS Shelters

ABSTRACT

This guide for school personnel is intended to sensitize them to the special problems of homeless students, to help them meet their special needs, and to help them make school a more comfortable place for these students. It is divided into four areas of particular concern for homeless children. The first, food, makes the following points: (1) since federal breakfast programs may be inadequate, teachers should have snacks on hand for discreet distribution to hungry students; (2) students receiving free or reduced-cost meals should not be publicly identified; (3) students may not have money for food on field trips and (4) students may not eat the kinds of food usually shown in magazines or cited as examples of good nutrition, and some may exist on only peanut butter or other food distributed free. The second area discussed, shelter, covers the following issues: (1) the problems of communicating with parents who move from temporary shelter to temporary shelter; (2) the fact that these makeshift homes may lack educational supplies like dictionaries and crayons, and even televisions, whose existence at home is usually assumed by teachers assigning programs to watch; and (3) the difficulty for students in handling term-long projects when they may move several times in the course of completing the assignment. The third area discussed, clothing, makes the following suggestions: (1) teachers should not emphasize the importance of stylish clothing or make donations of clothing to poor children known to others; (2) centers for free clothing should be established, with special emphasis on gym attire and other special items needed for school programs; and (3) school showers and washing machines should be made available for student use. The fourth area discussed, self-esteem, recommends that the experiences of homeless students be presented as equal in value and interest to those of more privileged students; and that their particular behaviors, such as an unwillingness to share personal possessions because they have so few of them, be respected. (WS)

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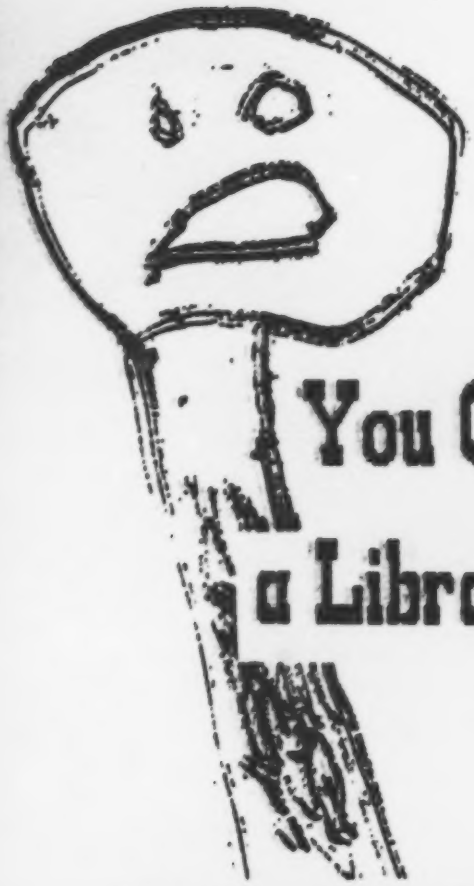

# You Can't Get a Library Card If You're Homeless

Picture by Doug Gumlaw age 5

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YOU CAN'T GET A LIBRARY CARD
IF YOU'RE HOMELESS

Making School a Better Place for
Homeless Students

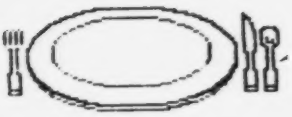
As one educator stated, "homelessness is not a problem educators can solve, but educators should not become part of the problem".

The thoughts ideas on these pages come from ones that you have considered and made adaptations for as you deal with the increasing number of homeless children in your school or classes. Others may have escaped your imagination. And still there are other ideas and thoughts you have regarding homeless students and their education which are not included. For the latter you are encouraged to share these with other staff members in your school.

The assumption is that knowledge and awareness will increase the likelihood of a positive educational experience for homeless students. In some cases the thoughts shared might be applicable for other students as well.

Let's look at some of the basics....

Food - Shelter - Clothing - Self Esteem



# FOOD

A variety of studies indicate to us that students perform better when they eat breakfast. Often homeless children do not have an adequate meal to start their day.

The logical thought: federal breakfast and lunch programs. Some schools which provide neither. Whether a campaign is underway for meal programs, (or as we know, most elementary teachers have a box of graham crackers hidden behind the red construction paper in the closet) the absence of regular nutritious meals is a detriment to the potential learning of homeless students. Slipping a snack to a high schooler is even more of a challenge.

And an old thought, no student likes to line up first or last or have a different color ticket designating their free or reduced meal status.

And where else might food be a problem in school for homeless students? A field trip is planned and all the student needs to do is bring money for lunch...

Second graders often study the basic four food groups by charting with pictures what they had to eat. How many pictures of cornmeal mush are featured in McCalls?

When we notice what children bring for lunch and snacks, do we wonder why there is none or that it's always peanut butter. (Bulk peanut butter and cornmeal were recently the free subsidy items.)

Food, that we take for granted for all students, can be a barrier to the homeless. We need to be aware of the possibility that this may be an issue and think of and provide alternatives.

# SHELTER

Homeless means you don't have a "fixed, regular or adequate residence".

Considering these limitations, how might that continue to be an educational barrier?

Communication is a big one. How can we inform the parents of their children's progress or what the school has to offer? If it is a tradition that the birthday child's parent sends in the cupcakes, how does the parent find out that expectation? (not to mention can one afford to buy 2 dozen cupcakes or where can they bake them?) Do parents of homeless children attend the school's open house at which the parents go through a simulated student schedule? - especially when the family has moved twice during the first marking period and they are in temporary residence in a shelter.

Do we take for granted that most places where children live have paper, pencils, crayons, dictionaries? If we do, we shouldn't. Perhaps when we make assignments for home projects we should offer the tools to complete the task.

Some middle graders receive TV assignments. If one lives in a car, it may be next to impossible to complete such an assignment. Or if one lives in a shelter and shares television viewing with 20 others, it's not likely Discovery will beat out Wheel of Fortune. As teachers, we then face the incomplete assignment.

What about semester-long assignments, journals, research projects, etc. For some homeless students, moving is a big part of their existence. How much investment can a student put into a project when circumstances might cause the student to move on before the project has been completed? Keep in mind: "you can't get a library card if you're homeless".

More and more information and programming has been directed toward "parent involvement". The homeless family's participation with or without a roof, should be encouraged.

School curriculum has changed over time to address the changing family structure, social issues, and sex equity. Some adjustments may need to be made as our sensitivity to homelessness increases.

Lack of adequate shelter, unfortunately not a constitutional right, can have dire implications on the rights of homeless children receiving an education.

# CLOTHING

In the era of designer everything, clothing is an issue for a lot of students. Status consciousness rises with the grade levels in school. Student peers, particularly in the middle school grades, are some of the most severe critics. A well meaning teacher has let his/her donation to a student become too public. A strong emphasis on stylistic clothing by a teacher may inadvertently send the wrong message to some homeless students. Some homeless children may appear as well dressed and groomed as any other child in school, others may be less fortunate. Their ability to learn should not be hampered by their appearance. And all students need to be respectful of one another.

Those requirements for special gym attire might be a burden for many. And even though there may be donations for such situations, how do we find out about the need and alleviate the problem without embarrassment and the retention of pride?

Do you know the available possibilities for free clothing in your area, should someone need to know? Could a student avail him/her self of the locker room showers or home economics washing machine during non school hours, should there be the need and desire?

Clothing, or lack of "appropriate" attire for some homeless children is such an issue that they don't even want to attend school.

# SELF ESTEEM

An individual's needs and feelings of self worth are certainly aligned with their ability to achieve in school.

Are there experiences which homeless children have that are seen as valuable in our school settings? The shared experience of one child's cross country trip with his/her family is viewed differently than a homeless family's trek across the states from California. Is there some way to capitalize on the wide variety of individuals a student living in a shelter might meet? Is there some recognition of a student's determination to be in school when it has been a turbulent time in the home environment?

How should we handle the homeless youngster who is having difficulty sharing the one toy he/she brings to school? - possibly knowing that the student may have limited personal belongings.

Is there a way to bend the rules for a student who feels a strong need to wear his/her coat during the school day? Not knowing when one might move again makes that coat a possible symbol of a home. When a student refuses to remove his/her hat do we recognize the importance to the child and negotiate with him/her carrying it in his/her pocket or do we take it from him/her and put it in our bottom desk drawer?

But it is not the student's fault that they are homeless. Being a part of a school may be just what that student needs to provide personal support or at least help balance some of the other concerns around being homeless. Are there methods to allow a student to become involved in school activities that are already underway? Are these students apprised of all the opportunities the school has to offer even if there is a 30 day emergency housing placement? If we haven't considered that, let's think about it now.

## Closing Thoughts

Some of our frustrations about the issues surrounding homelessness must be put aside. Yes, it's difficult getting a new student mid year and not being sure of appropriate placement because school records did not accompany their arrival. And it's sometimes tedious to spend a free period gathering books and supplies for a new student, especially after we just returned items to storage from the last student who only stayed 2 1/2 weeks.

Are there supports (sure things) a school can put in place for homeless students, regardless of the possible limited length of stay, which sends the message that school is a supportive, caring place and we care about the student as an individual, regardless of where they live? And even if we believe it, is our message believable?

Yes, some of the thoughts presented appear to be simplistic but awareness about education's role with homeless students and families is important if educators are not to become part of the problem.

## SOME FACTS

How many homeless children are there?

1988 national statistics estimate that there are 220,000 school age homeless children.

Approximately 400 homeless children attend public schools in Vermont. This number does not include runaways, children in shelters for domestic violence, or homeless children and youth not attending school.

Where do these children live?

In shelters, with friends, with relatives, in cars, busses, vans and tents. Homeless children live with their parents and without.

What is the Department of Education's role?

Under the federal law (Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act (title vii, subtitle b)) each state is required to "ensure that homeless children and youth have access to a free, appropriate public education which would be provided to children of residents of the state."

Further, each state must develop a plan. Information dissemination is a part of the Vermont State Plan. This booklet is part of that section of the plan.

SPECIAL THANKS TO...

Doug Gumlaw - whose drawing of a family member appears on the cover of this booklet. Doug and his family were living at the Family Firehouse Shelter in Burlington when he did this picture. Doug is 5 years old.

Toddy Hagans - graphic designer for this booklet who volunteered her time and talents.

Kathy Brown - Compensatory Education support staff.

For more information, contact:

Education of Homeless Children
and Youth Project

State Department of Education
120 State Street
Montpelier, VT 05602
802-828-2753

<u>You Can't Get A Library Card If You're Homeless</u> - by Mitzi Beach, Coordinator, Education of Homeless Children and Youth Project.

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